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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 000356

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SUBJECT: SAUDI KING SHAKES UP RELGIOUS ESTABLISHMENT, SPURS

REFORM

REF: A. RIYADH 302
[B](#). RIYADH 319
[C](#). RIYADH 345

Classified By: Political Counselor Lisa M. Carle
reasons 1.4 (b) & (d).

[1](#). (C) SUMMARY: The Saudi King's 14 February ministerial and other high-level appointments, with major changes in education and the judiciary, reflect his long-term strategy to reduce the influence of reactionary clerics and reform the institutions impeding the Kingdom's modernization through gradual changes aimed at co-opting, rather than confronting, his opponents. This message presents an overview of the changes; septels examining each sector to follow. End summary.

[2](#). (U) NEW APPOINTMENTS: In the first major cabinet shakeup since he ascended the throne in 2005, on February 14 Saudi King Abdallah announced the appointment of new ministers of health, information, education and justice. He also appointed several new royal advisors, and new heads of the major Saudi judicial bodies, at least 50 new senior judges, a restructured and expanded council of senior Ulama (religious scholars), and appointments for the 5th term of the Majlis Al-Shoura, with 82 new faces, including the first royal, among the 150 members.

[3](#). (C) REFORM STRATEGY: The King's new ministerial and other high-level official appointments can be seen as part of his strategy for gradual but systematic reform to address the structural causes underlying the country's political and economic problems. Key to this strategy are steps to reduce the influence of the narrow-minded Wahhabi clerics who have fueled extremism and obstructed change.

[4](#). (C) STRUCTURAL CHANGES: The King's latest action seemed to have three goals:

--implementing his 2007 judicial reform decree, which orders an expansion of the jurisdiction of the Kingdom's Shari'a Courts as well a new system for appeals and review of judicial decisions;

--putting a member of the royal family (his son-in-law), with the power to implement changes, in charge of the Education Ministry, heretofore the domain of the religious establishment; and

--restructuring the Ulama (clerical institutions) to reduce the influence of ideological extremists and reactionaries and expand the sources of Sharia jurisprudence useful in achieving goals 1 & 2.

¶5. (U) EDUCATION, FIRST WOMAN: The King appointed his son-in-law, Prince Faisal bin Abdallah bin Muhammad Al Saud (the husband of daughter Adila) as Minister of Education. He also appointed another well-known reformer, Faisal Al-Mu'ammur, who had been in charge of the National Dialogue Center, as one deputy, and appointed an expert in girls' education Norah Al-Faiz, as the first female deputy minister (ref A).

¶6. (C) JUSTICE & COURTS: The most sweeping changes were in the complicated set of institutions that make up Saudi Arabia's fragmented, contradictory and confusing judicial system. With these changes, the King finally jump-started implementation of the judicial reform decree he had issued in October 2007 by appointing new leaders to every single judicial body and launching two new high courts. (Septel will provide detailed analysis of these changes.)

¶7. (C) RELIGIOUS SCHOLARS: Perhaps of greater near-term significance, however, was the King's order to reorganize the Council of Senior Ulama. The King ordered that the council be "re-established" under a new secretary general with an expanded membership of 21 members, and representation of all four schools of Sunni jurisprudence, instead of only the strict Hanbali school followed by most Saudis and decreed since the founding of the Saudi state as the primary source of jurisprudence for Saudi religious rulings. This is a major shift for the Kingdom, and a key step towards actual judicial reform, since it will introduce more moderate Sunni legal voices and a broader range of opinions into Saudi juridical debates.

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¶8. (U) KINDER, GENTLER RELIGIOUS POLICE: King Abdallah also fired the controversial head of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, aka the Mutawwain, and appointed a more conciliatory cleric, Shaikh Abdalaziz Al-Humayn, to replace him. Al-Humayn promptly held a news conference to announce his intention to bring the Mutawwain "closer to the people's hearts."

¶9. (C) INFORMATION: The new Information Minister, Abdalaziz Khoja, had been serving as Saudi Ambassador to the Lebanon (ref c). Contacts contend that the former Minister of Information, known as a reformer, was replaced because of corruption. He was said to have awarded lucrative advertising contracts on Saudi television to his son.

¶10. (U) OTHER CHANGES: The King appointed Saudi Arabia's most renowned surgeon and former head of the National Guard Hospital, Dr. Abdallah al-Rabia, as Minister of Health. The head of the Central Bank, the Saudi Monetary Agency, was allowed to retire and replaced by his deputy, Mohammed al-Jasser, in a move not expected to result in major changes in Saudi monetary policy (ref b). The Deputy of the Joint Chiefs of Defense retired, and was replaced by the head of Saudi Land Forces, who in turn was replaced by his deputy. The head of the Saudi Human Rights Commission was also allowed to resign, and replaced by the head of the Majlis Al-Shoura Saudi-US Friendship Committee, Bandar Al-Aiban.

¶11. (C) MORE TO COME? The King did not formally renew the other members of the cabinet, and additional changes, most notably of the unpopular Minister of Labor, Dr. Ghazi al-Gosaibi, are rumored to be in the works. We don't expect changes in the key portfolios of foreign affairs, interior, oil, or finance, however. NOTE: Senior Saudi officials, including royals, are appointed for 4-year terms, and the last round of ministerial appointments was four years ago, about six months before Abdallah became King. He could have made these changes earlier, but chose to wait until most of the officials' terms were up. Also, at the time the government was focused on its domestic battle with Al-Qaida, and it is likely the King judged that the time was not propitious for sweeping changes in the religious

establishment.

¶12. (C) POSITIVE REACTION, FOR NOW: Public reaction to the changes has been largely positive. The new officials are younger and more in tune with the King's agenda for reform and interfaith dialogue than their predecessors. Jamal Khashoggi, editor of Al-Watan newspaper, told an AP reporter that the new appointees "bring not only new blood but also new ideas. They are more moderate and many are also close to the reform agenda of the King, having worked closely with him. The people now in charge are not being ordered to implement reform," Khashoggi concluded. "They believe in reform." Opinion among Embassy contacts reflects this view, though many "liberals" expressed disappointment that the changes were not sweeping enough. Women welcomed the appointment of Dr. Fayiz but said a woman should have been appointed to the cabinet, and other contacts were skeptical that the King is truly interested in reform. Opinion among religious hardliners is harder to gauge. The King's incremental approach favors co-opting rather than confronting his opponents, and it would appear that the King succeeded in "persuading" the ulama to acquiesce to his plan. One of his major selling points has likely been that his reforms entail expanding Shari'a, a goal shared by the Ulama. (Septels will examine these changes in depth.)

FRAKER